

The Bearing of the Context on Well-Known Passages.

#1. “My times are in Thy hand.” pp. 146, 147

Many a believer during periods of trial has breathed the words of the Psalmist, “My times are in Thy hand” (Psa. xxxi. 15), and we are sure that the slightest movement towards a more implicit trust in the Lord will always receive His encouragement. Yet, like many other oft-quoted passages of Scripture, there is a qualifying context, and our knowledge of this will make the committal all the more real and wonderful.

We observe first that the words “My times are in Thy hand” refer to the external circumstances of life rather than to the more fundamental inner realities. We have a very clear expansion of what these “times” involve in the first eight verses of Eccles. iii.:

“A time to be born, and a time to die A time for war, and a time for peace”
(Eccles. iii. 1-8).

Here, in a series of fourteen pairs of opposite facts, we have a summing-up of our “times”. These “times”, says the Psalmist to the Lord, “are in Thy hand”—all my outgoings and incomings, all the movements of daily life. If we know anything of the Word, however, we shall also realize that it is impossible for any man to commit his whole life to the Lord unless his heart and soul go with it. If we look back to verse 5 of the same Psalm we shall find that this thought has already been expressed:

“Into Thine hand I commit my SPIRIT; Thou hast redeemed me” (Psa. xxxi. 5).

Here we have the inner aspect of the matter. Before we can truly say “My *times* (that is, the externals of life) are in Thy hand” we must also be able to say: “Into Thine hand I commit my *spirit*.”

If the reader will refer to verse 15 he will see that the phrase “My times are in Thy hand” is followed by a reference to deliverance “from the hand of his enemies”. Following the reference to the “spirit” in verse 5, on the other hand, we have the words: “Thou hast redeemed me.” The two references, to the “hand” of the Lord, and the “hand” of the enemy, are suggestive, and further study reveals the following arrangement:

A | Psa. xxxi. 5. “Thine hand.” Spirit committed.
B | 8. “The hand of the enemy.” Not shut up.
A | 15. “Thy hand.” Times.
B | 15. “The hand of enemies.” Deliver me.

Let us by all means, and with all our heart, say unto the Lord, “My times are in Thy hand”, but let us also commit our spirit to Him too.

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#2. “Light affliction” and the “Weight of glory”. p. 40

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (II Cor. iv. 17).

A deal of harm may be done if we lift this passage out of its context and press its teaching upon souls unprepared by truth to receive it. It is *not true* that “affliction”, considered in itself, is “light”. Paul had confessed earlier in this same epistle that he had been “pressed out of measure, above strength” by the trouble that came upon him in Asia (II Cor. i. 8). He later gives also a list of sufferings that neither he nor any sane person could call “light afflictions” (II Cor. xi. 23-28).

When we quote II Cor. iv. 17, we must remember the context, especially the condition that is made in verse 18. If we would speak truth with our neighbour, the word “while” is the qualifying word that must be included whenever we quote this passage. “While” the sufferer looks not at things seen but at things “not seen”, the affliction becomes, *by comparison*, “light”, and “while” he thus reacts to affliction it will “work” for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. But if the eye is on the visible, the self-same suffering will be by no means “light”, and its effects will be the very reverse of the triumph suggested by the words “weight of glory”.

The bearing of the context must never be forgotten, whether the subject be doctrine, practice, exhortation, consolation, or the whole range of dispensational truth.

#3. “We glory in tribulations” (Rom. v. 3). pp. 119, 120

Inasmuch as there is no punctuation, or even division into sentences, or in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, there is no mechanical safeguard against misquotation, the meaning, as demanded by the context, must always be considered.

For any healthy, happy and intelligent young man to say that “to die” was “gain”, or that he “gloried in tribulations”, would not sound like a genuine statement. Moreover, to take the opposite case, for anyone in unhappy circumstances to use the same words, would be indicative of despair, or at least of very morbid feelings. In Rom. v. 3 the Apostle does not simply say, “We glory in tribulations” as an isolated remark. He prefaces his statement by the phrase, “And not only so”, which clearly indicates a qualifying context, and he follows it up with the words “also” and “but”.

The Apostle's statement, seen in its context, is a note of triumph. It is healthy and sane, the very reverse of anything morbid:

“And rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, *and not only so, but* we glory in tribulations *also*, knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Rom. v. 3).

Let us always remember that a consideration of the context invariably adds to the fullness and truth of a passage, and is essential to a true interpretation.

#4. “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church” (Phil. iii. 6). pp. 160, 161

When Paul wrote these words to the Philippians, it is just possible, taking the statement by itself, that he used the word translated “persecuting” in its primitive meaning of “pursuing”. If we adopt this view, the passage would mean that he sought most earnestly to reach the coveted position of membership of the church. There are contextual reasons, however, that make this translation impossible. Considering first the remote context we read in I Cor. xv.:

“I persecuted the church of God” (I Cor. xv. 9).

This is given as a reason why Paul considered himself “the least of the apostles” and “not meet to be called an apostle”. This would not make sense if he intended us to understand that he was anxiously desiring to reach the spiritual position of the church of God.

In Galatians we read:

“I persecuted the church of God AND WASTED IT” (Gal. i. 13).

The added words “and wasted it” settle the Apostle's meaning without any shadow of doubt. But this is not all. He gives this as an example of his zeal in the “Jew's religion” and makes the boast that he profited in that religion above many that were his equals (Gal. i. 14). It is in this epistle that the Apostle, the erstwhile zealot for Judaism, declares:

“I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing” (Gal. v. 2).

And again, in Chapter vi.:

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk by this rule, peace be on them” (Gal. vi. 15, 16).

Of these same Galatians Paul asks “Are ye so foolish? having begun in the spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?” and of himself he says:

“God forbid that I should glory (*kauchomai*) save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. vi. 14).

The student of Scripture will need no argument to prove that these references in Galatians can all be matched in Philippians, of which indeed they form the spiritual background. The true circumcision, says the Apostle are they which “worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus (*kauchomai*), and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. iii. 3). Again Galatians and Philippians are the only epistles where the Apostle speaks of walking according to a “rule” (*Kanon*). So also the question of being made “perfect” raised in Galatians, recurs in Phil. iii. 15.

Coming to the near context and allowing the remote context to decide the Apostle’s meaning, we can see that the words “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church” represent an example of his “profiting in the Jew’s religion” just as much as it was in Gal. i. All this and more would have to be discredited or set aside before it would be possible to agree that in Phil. iii., Paul used the word *dioko* in a good sense.

No interpretation of Scripture can be accepted if it does not stand the test of being examined in the light of both the “near” and “remote” contexts.